TO BUILD A CHURCH

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Harbison Lecture #1
First Presbyterian Church
Pensacola, Florida
February 15, 2009

Elaine Pagels is a distinguished professor at Princeton University. She is not a seminary professor. She is a humanities scholar who studies and knows a lot about the human phenomenon of religion. Her specialty is early Christianity, and she is widely respected for her scholarly research and books. She is not particularly a church person. In fact, she had pretty much given up on the church as an institution

worthy of her time and attention, not unlike a lot of thoughtful people.

But she begins one of her books, *Beyond Belief,* with an unusual—for her — anecdote and a very powerful witness.

On a bright, cold Sunday morning in New York, she interrupted her daily run by stopping in the vestibule of an Episcopal church to get warm. Two days earlier, her two-and-a-half-year-old son had been diagnosed with an invariably fatal lung disease. I cannot even begin to imagine how devastating that experience must be. She writes:

> **“Since I had not been in church for a long time, I was startled by my response to the worship in progress**

—the soaring harmonies of the choir singing with the congregation; and the priest, a woman in bright gold and white vestments, proclaiming the prayers in a clear resonant voice. As I stood watching, a thought came to me: Here is a family that knows how to face death. . . .

“The day after we heard Mark’s diagnosis—and that he had a few months to live, maybe a few years—a team of doctors urged us to authorize a lung biopsy, a painful and invasive procedure. How could this help? It couldn’t, they explained; but the procedure would let them see how far the disease had progressed. Mark was already

exhausted by the previous day's ordeal. Holding him, I felt that if more masked strangers poked needles into him in an operating room, he might lose heart—literally—and die. We refused the biopsy, gathered Mark's blanket, clothes, and Peter Rabbit, and carried him home.

"Standing in the back of that church, I recognized, uncomfortably, that I needed to be there. Here was a place to weep without imposing tears upon a child; and here was a heterogeneous community that had gathered to sing, to celebrate, to acknowledge common needs, and to

deal with what we cannot control or imagine" (pp. 3–4)

It's more common these days to criticize the church than to celebrate it. It's the easiest target in the world, the church is. It always has been. Among institutions, none has higher aspirations or a more ambitious mission statement, and none, consequently, misses the mark by a wider margin than the church.

It is so easy to criticize the church, dismiss the church as irrelevant. Sociologists are telling us that modern — or postmodern religion is and will be an individual matter, not institutional. One of the most important of these sociologists of religion, Wade Clark Roof, calls the United States, A Nation of

Seekers, not joiners. "Spirituality" is the rage, a privatized quest for God, meaning, happiness, or at least good feelings — which has less and less to do with religion as we know it, particularly institutional religion. "I'm a spiritual person," Americans are inclined to say. "But I'm not religious." Which means: "I read books on spirituality, write in a journal about my spiritual journey, practice deep breathing, yoga, and meditation before breakfast, and watch Oprah Winfrey, who talks about spirituality a lot — but I don't go to church."

Robert Bellah, *Habits of the Heart . . .*

Sheik (?)

People who do go to church, who express their spirituality institutionally, people who know the church intimately and attend worship, volunteer, study, serve as officers in times of controversy and challenge and conflict when the church is not very pretty and not much fun, people who know the church intimately, have a lover's quarrel with it. Robert Frost said he had a "lover's quarrel with the world." People who know the church intimately have a lover's quarrel with the church.

Author Annie Dillard— in an essay in *The New York Times* —"The Ascension:"

"What a pity, that so hard on the heels of Christ come the Christians

(the church). Who can believe in them?"
[Incarnation, Contemporary Writers on the New Testament, p.36, Edited by Alfred Corn]

The English poet Southey:

"I could believe in Christ if he did not drag behind him his leprous bride, the church." (William Willimon, *What's Right With the Church*, p.3)

William Willimon, Chaplain at Duke and former parish pastor, now a Methodist Bishop in Alabama —

"Jesus has many admirers who feel he married beneath his station.

They love Christ but are unable to love those whom he loved…For most of us the church is an embarrassment.” (p. 3, 13)

Bill Gates, for some years the richest man in the world and therefore granted instant status as a profoundly wise man as well—

“Just in terms of the allocation of time resources, religion is not very efficient. There’s a lot more I could be doing on Sunday morning.”

And on that same topic, Willimon tells about a church visitation team from his Methodist parish calling on a young woman who said that she did not like ‘organized religion’ and a team member

replied, “Well, you’ll be happy at Northside Church: we’ve been trying for thirty years but we ain’t got it organized yet.” (Ibid p.36)

The church, the actual church, not the abstract church idea of the church but the actual church we say we believe in, made of real flesh and blood people, has always been something of an anomaly.

Jesus and his disciples are walking along the road one day near the Roman city of Caesarea Philippi, and out of the blue he asks them, “Who are people saying I am?’ They answer, “some say a prophet, Elijah, John the Baptist.” “But you,” he asks, “who do you say that I am?” Peter—always impetuous, bold—

blurts out, “You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” It was a stunning moment. No one had ever said that about him before. It was a defining moment, and that question, “Who do you say that I am,” rings all the way down across the centuries and confronts us. The passage, however, goes on in a surprising direction. “You are Petros—the Rock,” Jesus says, “and on this rock I will build my church,” and it’s the first time that word *church* is used. And then he goes on to the heart of the matter: “And the gates of Hades, the gates of hell, literally the gates of death, the power of death, will not prevail against it, my church.”

We’ve been arguing about what that means for all of our history. Our

Roman Catholic friends believe that it's about the papacy, that Peter's status and authority, given by Jesus himself, are passed down to his successors, the popes. Protestants generally have believed that the rock upon which Jesus would build a church was Peter's confession, and that it's a major over-translation to go from his encounter with Jesus to the papacy. That's not my concern this evening.

Instead, I'm asking, did Jesus intend to build a church, and did he mean it when he said the gates of hell would not prevail against his church? Novelist, poet and professor, Reynolds Price, has a lifelong love affair with Jesus but, like Elaine Pagels, not much time for church. In a book about the morality of Jesus—

which Price believes the church notoriously ignores—he introduced a new thought for me. He points out that "Jesus seems to have spent his youth working with his brothers in Joseph's construction business. The Greek word so famously translated "carpenter" can mean, more broadly, a builder" (*A Serious Way of Wandering,* p. 13).

What a nice new thought. Maybe what Jesus actually did for thirty years was not only make tables and stools and bowls and spoons in a tidy carpentry shop, as I was taught in Sunday school. Maybe he and Joseph built houses, dug and built the forms for the footing, and built the frame for the walls and the supporting beams for the ceiling. Maybe Jesus built homes in which people lived.

Maybe he and Joseph traveled to Sepphoris each day and worked on the Roman amphitheater. Maybe he built synagogues.

I believe he meant to build a church. I do not believe he knew how it would all pan out—all this amazing diversity and complexity deeply embedded in human history: the papacy, the monasteries and missionaries, the Reformation, the schools and hospitals, the magnificence of it all, and also the tragedy and the silliness. I think he took the great risk of leaving the task of being the church up to us, but I do believe deeply that he intended to leave behind followers, a movement, a company of men and women and children, united by nothing much more than a conviction that he

was God’s man, he was God’s revelation, united by the conviction that what he taught and the way he lived are nothing less than the truth, the one singular truth for which it is appropriate to live and die; a people united by the conviction that the truth was not defeated by his own tragic death but continues to live in history in the hopeful and loving and courageous and generous things his people do in the world. He called it his kingdom on earth, and he said it was present when his followers acted like he wanted them to act. And so, yes, he most certainly intended to build a church. And he wanted it to remind people of him every time they saw it, and he also wanted it to take a stand against death and the power of death on a regular basis.

He wanted his church to remember and remind the world that he was crucified, dead and buried, and on the third day he rose from the dead, and so death did not defeat him. Death is not what we thought. Death itself was defeated.

But first, let's acknowledge that it's a long way from perfect in here. Let's acknowledge the tragedy, the sorry things that have happened, the fallibility and humanity of the church, including our own church's obsession with the issue of whom to ordain and whom to refuse to ordain, squandering its energy and love and passion for justice and kindness in the world over an issue that most of our culture has long since

resolved. It's not perfect in here. Sometimes it's so imperfect, it's funny.

One of my favorite books is Arthur Herman's *How the Scots Invented the Modern World*—this is what Herman has to say about our own particular ancestors:

> **"The Presbyterian Ulster Scots also brought [to the New World] their burning hatred of Episcopalians (especially since as British subjects, they had to pay taxes for the established Anglican church in America). When one Anglican missionary tried to preach in the Carolinas—the locals (Presbyterians) disrupted his services, rioted while he preached,**

started a pack of dogs fighting outside the church, loosed his horse, stole his church key, refused him food and drink, and gave two barrels of whiskey to his congregation. [I have to say that most of the Episcopalians I know would have welcomed that. Later, having escaped and returned to civilization, the missionary wrote about his Presbyterian adversaries:] "They delight in their present low, loutish, heathenish, hellish life and seem not desirous of changing it." (p. 237)

It's not perfect in here, and sometimes it is so imperfect, it is funny. We spend so much time on inconsequentials, arguing over the color

of the carpet in the sanctuary, the choice of hymns, pay raises for the custodians, (more illustrations here)

Church people know that better than anybody on the outside. But sometimes it is beautiful and brave and hopeful. Regularly, in fact, good and compassionate and redeeming things happen in the world in the name of Jesus Christ and because of his church. Regularly, quietly, people are fed and clothed and sheltered and nurtured and educated. Regularly, mostly quietly, people are lifted up and given new sight, new vision, new life because of the church Jesus built.

Popular author Anne Lamott, who returned to the church recently after a

long absence and a very difficult life, wrote in *Salon* that she insists her adolescent son go to church even if he hates it. Her revelation stimulated a lot of response, much of it negative. People accused her of oppressing her child, abusing him even by making him go to church on Sunday. Her response was delightful. "Left to their own," she said, "teenagers would opt out of many important things like flossing their teeth and homework. It's good to do uncomfortable things. It's weight training for life." And then she went deeper: "Teens who don't go to church miss opportunities to see people loving God back. Learning to love back is the hardest part of being alone" (*Christian Century*, 23 August 2003).

Bill McKibben, author of *Returning God to the Center: Consumerism and the Environmental Threat*, says that what defines and shapes our culture is not the Biblical story, or the Christian consensus, or the Judeo-Christian tradition — but television. America's kids watch an average of 4 ½ hours a day. "McKibben gathered 2400 hours of videotape — all the programs offered on TV during one day, studied them for a year, and concluded that the distillation of all those thousands of game shows and talk shows and reality shows and sitcoms and commercials was the simple notion: "You are the most important thing on the face of the earth. Your immediate desires are all that count. Do it your way. This Bud's for you." [See

Marva Dawn, *A Royal Waste of Time*, P.99]

There is an alternative way of thinking. It was radically counter-culture in the first century and remains so in the 21st century. This way was actually lived out once, in the world, in human history, in a human being. Jesus of Nazareth, who Paul asserts was God's only son, the embodiment of the reality and mystery of God. He was a man for others. He lived out his life on behalf of others. He gave his life away. That's who God is, Paul is saying, not some Olympian figure, muscular, sitting on a mighty throne, casting thunderbolts or frowning in judgment at human misdeeds, judging, condemning. No—God is here—this one does not condemn

—this one who gives life away for others. This one who says "blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the meek", this one who goes out of his way to include the very ones his own religion condemned and excluded: the unclean, the socially unacceptable, the marginal, the sinners: this one who leaves 99 sheep to track the one who is lost: this one who opens his arms and great heart and welcomes the uninvited to the banquet table in his kingdom: this one who says, "if you save your life you lose it, if you give your life away in my name, you will find it"—this one who follows the way of Agape to the end, dying on a cross, Christ crucified.

That is who God is and that is who we are called to be.

Paul said the church will look like Jesus — "The Body of Christ," he said.

John Cobb, one of our best thinkers, in a book, *Reclaiming the Church*, offers some advice. There are three marks of a vital church…

The first is <u>cultural engagement.</u> It is openly and intentionally incarnational. The Word became flesh: God's word — God's love — God's passion became Jesus who lived thoroughly in the world. That's what the church is supposed to do and be. Not a sheltered cloister, isolating, protecting us from the world, hiding from all the complexity and untidiness and messiness of life in the

world, but a body that lives in and is engaged with the world.

The second mark of a vital church, according to Cobb is <u>responsiveness to societal change</u>.

Our world is different today and changing fast. It is not the same world as it was 200, 100, or even 20 years ago. There are different issues and challenges. Your vitality depends on your identifying what they are and responding faithfully. No one can do that for you. I can tell you how Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago is trying to respond to the issue of poverty, racism, and a mammoth upheaval in the public housing projects nearby, but that wouldn't be particularly helpful to you.

What we all must do — those of us who God has called to be responsible for the life of the church in this time — is be open to the new. Martin Marty says that the last 7 words of the institutional church will be, "But we never did that way before!"

All the management experts in the world teach one basic truth — namely that institutional survival will depend in the future on the ability to understand change, manage change, initiate change. So don't be afraid to do it different. Be responsive to your neighbor and neighborhood, your community, the world.

Third, a vital church will <u>think theologically</u>.

What doesn't change about us is our faith — the "unshakeable foundation," of faith in God as God has come to us in Jesus Christ. What doesn't change is our commitment to live out our calling to be his body — with integrity and courage and love.

There is a real hunger for authentic religion in the world today and a real responsiveness when the church shows itself to be the incarnation of God's love for the world.

Love is not afraid of anything. Love is not afraid to tell the truth and to live the truth. Love is not afraid to break

with convention and cultural custom. Love isn't afraid to take risks, to reach across racial, economic, religious, or gender boundaries: love takes chances in offering hospitality to those who are marginalized, kept out, scorned by the world. Love, in the name of Jesus Christ, is always more worried about who is excluded than who is included. Love is not weak and passive.

And because this radical new way of being has the power and eternity of God in it, it can bear all things, it can believe all things, it can hope all things, it can endure all things, anything, everything. Because love—this mysterious essence of God—this absolute foundation of the universe and of human life—this love never ends. And when somehow, by

God’s good grace, the community does it, embodies the reality of God’s love, a miracle happens: it becomes the Body of Christ, the Church.

> **“None of us,” Barbara Wheeler, President of Auburn Seminary, says “None of us is strong enough to keep loving God in those dark nights of the soul when it feels as if God doesn’t care about our pain and may even be causing it…Every believer at some time has felt abandoned by God.”**

…Words which speak for all of us when we face tragedy, defeat, loss, death.

“In such moments, when God is far away, when our faith is weak or non-existent…In moments like these we need the church, all those other lovers of God who, in tough times, keep the faith.”

He meant to build a church, to leave behind a company, a people, because it is very difficult to follow him alone. You need traveling companions on this journey to follow him: people to talk to, and argue with, people to love and care for, people who will believe and sing and pray on the days you can’t believe and sing and pray, people with whom to be signs of God’s kingdom, light in the city, the church of Jesus Christ.

And I believe, with everything in me, that he was perfectly serious when he left us that vivid, powerful image of the church standing against the gates of hell, the power of death itself. I think the stakes are that high.

To be blunt about it, death's what we have to contend with, is it not? Death is the shadow that falls into every life. The gates of Hades, Tom Long says, "is a symbol for everything that opposes God's will: the powers of death and destruction that ravage human life" (*Westminster Bible Companion: Matthew,* p. 186).

The church's job—because Jesus gave it to us—is to be a reminder that we all need, which is that death does not

have the last word about us: our institutions, our hopes and most precious dreams, our dearest ones, our deepest loves. Death does not have the last word. He does; Jesus Christ does. It is our job never to forget that, to hold on to the promise for dear life, to remind one another on those days when life causes us to forget it, or doubt it, or disbelieve it, that the gates of hell will not prevail: Jesus Christ will.

And I thought of one of our members who died a few years ago of AIDS. He loved the Presbyterian Church, but the PC (U.S.A.) has built a barrier to keep individuals like Glen from becoming ministers, or Elders, or Deacons. In spite of that he was an active member and participant in the life

of the congregation and never missed worship — as long as he was able. I keep a picture of him so I don't forget him — as a reminder of him and what he said and taught me about the church — because even ministers become impatient with the church sometimes wonder about it and are tempted to think that real religion is a private personal spirituality.

When he could no longer attend worship, Glen listened to the Sunday morning worship service tapes. Near the end he was in a hospice facility and on one of my last visits he talked about his life and death. It was, I recall, two weeks before Easter. The "Big One" he called it. The one we all need to hear. I asked him, "What's the hardest part?"

He told me that it was hard to fall asleep at night. He was so sick and at night when all the guests and family had gone home, he felt alone with his pain and his weakness and the knowledge that he was dying. "You know what I do?" he said. "I get out my tape player and put on my ear phones and listen to the Sunday worship service. I must have a hundred tapes. It settles me down. Sometimes I fall asleep during the prelude or anthem and often during your sermon (I'm not the only one who does that!)…but almost every night I go to sleep that way — here in bed, but also in my church."

St. Paul said, "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."

“Here is a family that knows how to face death,” Elaine Pagels wrote, shivering in the narthex of the church, trying to cope with the worst thing that can happen to a parent.

The church I am privileged to serve underwent institutional trauma recently, and a profound experience of the power of the Gospel in the face of death.

The Executive Associate Pastor, Dana Ferguson, died. She was just 42 years old, married, the mother of eleven-year-old twin boys. Dana was from Batesville, Mississippi, went to a private women’s college and Princeton Seminary. She was stylish, her attire was anything but conventional clergy.

She had a big laugh and lighted up every room she entered. Her colleagues respected her, members of the congregation loved her — loved her sermons and particularly her prayers which were beautifully crafted with just the right words, evocative — almost daringly personal. People pulled out kleenex and daubed their eyes when Dana prayed.

She came to Fourth Presbyterian Church as Associate for Mission and unlikely as it seems, the small-town woman from the deep South had a profound and powerful and uncompromising commitment to social justice and equality for all of God's children — across barriers of race, economic and social class, age, gender

and sexual orientation. She was not particularly political: these convictions grew out of her deeply personal faith in Jesus Christ and her trust in him.

It is not possible to be at the center of a big, visible, urban church and hide something as profound as a serious illness.

Five years ago Dana began to be sick, lost a lot of weight, was jaundiced, couldn't eat. She continued to come to work and people saw what was happening. Diagnosis and surgeries at major Chicago Medical Centers, and at the Mayo Clinic didn't seem to help. Finally, after a hemorrhage and near catastrophe, and ER doctor in a small Michigan city put his finger on the

problem. She returned to Chicago, had the appropriate operation and slowly got better, returned to work.

Then about six months ago, the condition returned — a rare liver condition, not classical malignancy, but just as debilitating. The very visible symptoms returned — weight loss, jaundice. We made the very difficult decision to put her on medical leave in September and she turned to the University of Chicago Hospitals. For the next two months she underwent every conceivable test and procedure and surgery, and continued to decline. All the while, the congregation that loved her watched and waited. On October 27th Dana died.

Her funeral was a powerful experience and witness. She had planned the service and asked me to preach — "a full sermon" she said, "not one of those little bitty funeral meditations. Give them their money's worth." We sang the great hymns of the church. Our choir sang. The Brass Ensemble that plays monthly for worship played. At the end, Donna Gray and Calum MacLeod, two of her colleagues and I preceded her casket, with her Ferguson Plaid stole lying on the top, led by a bagpiper, playing "Amazing Grace." Her husband Wayne, her sons Daniel and Taylor, her mother Betsy and sister Liz followed.

It was perhaps the saddest moment any of us had ever experienced. So

much of life left. So much promise. So much love.

And then the most remarkable thing happened. The Brass Ensemble began the postlude "Just a Closer Walk with Thee" and after one stanza — turned abruptly to Dixieland. Dana had led several mission trips to New Orleans to build Habitat Houses after Hurricane Katrina. She loved New Orleans. Tears gave way to smiles. Smiles burst through tears. The Dixieland Jazz kept on and on — and at the end, the most amazing thing I have ever seen in church — happened.

That congregation — maybe 1,200 strong, stood and applauded.

And I couldn’t help think — this is why we are here. This is why there is a church.

“On this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell — the power of death — shall not prevail against it.”

Yes, Jesus meant to build a church. And yes, I believe, in the mystery of God’s will and God’s economy. God means for there to be a church here in Pensacola and Chicago and New York and Los Angeles. And, yes, I think one of the reasons you and I are on this earth is to help Jesus build his church and to pass it along to another generation of people who will follow us and be his church, his body.

“Nothing worth doing can be accomplished in a lifetime,” the great theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once said. “Therefore we must be saved by hope.” And so we are.

“I will build my church,” Jesus said, “And the gates of hell will not prevail against it.”

Thanks be to God.